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# ... Hill can't stop leaking?

**U**nder the polarizing pressure of differences over U.S. policy toward Central America, the congressional oversight designed to keep the intelligence agencies honest is coming apart at the seams.

Reagan officials and the CIA leadership place primary responsibility for a series of damaging leaks on covert-action operations on the congressional watchdog committees and particularly on their staffs. For their part, the Senate and House Intelligence Committees claim they have not been kept "fully and currently" informed. They maintain they would have opposed the covert mining operation successfully if advised promptly, as the law requires.

Whoever may be to blame, there is unanimous agreement that relations between the legislative and executive branches never have been worse on the question of how to ensure effective congressional review of secret intelligence operations. Both administration and CIA officials are bitterly resentful of deliberate leaks to the press they think can only come from individual members and staffers of the two intelligence committees.

A single authoritative news leak often can be enough to destroy or terminate even the best-planned covert action. The congressional staffer, who chooses to reveal anonymously to the press details of such an operation, wields the destructive power of a secret personal veto over national security policy.

The confirmation by Sen. Jesse Helms R-N.C. of CIA involvement in the Salvadoran election is only

the most publicized of many such damaging disclosures, and there has been no sign yet of any effective punishment to discourage the practice. As one of the intelligence chiefs remarked, "Congressional oversight has become a device through which to impose massive losses on ourselves."

Understandable fear of policy sabotage by calculated leak has led in turn to CIA officials becoming reluctant to supply staffers with advance detail on operations. This has fed the fires of congressional suspicion that their access to essential information is being deliberately obstructed.

CIA Director William Casey has written a tough letter to the committees complaining of excessive legislative intrusion. In reaction, congressional staffers are busily drafting new procedural rules that will define in debilitating detail when and how the CIA must inform

the Congress in advance of any covert action.

The executive and legislative branches seem to be on a collision course in their attempt to solve the oversight dilemma. In the process, the U.S. government could lose the capacity to respond effectively to the Soviet threat that is most immediate and menacing.

In the absence of a covert-action capability, the United States would have no means of giving discreet and timely assistance to its democratic allies in the Third World when they are threatened by Soviet

and Cuban proxies. Once a small country has been allowed to be transformed into a hardening police state, its escape from the Soviet orbit is rarely possible.

Hoping to avoid continuing confrontation in this vital area of foreign policy decision-making, cooler heads in the administration and moderates of both parties in Congress are beginning to think through the reforms in procedures and institutions that might enable the United States to conduct covert operations both responsibly and securely.

There is, for example, growing senatorial support for periodic lie detector tests as a condition for continuing employment on the staffs of the intelligence committees. These staffers carry in their heads more sensitive information than most

CIA employees, who all are required to take the tests. Administered by the FBI in this case, these periodic polygraph checks would not be a total guarantee of security but they would act as a powerful deterrent to the temptation to leak.

Also, there is growing awareness among the elected members of both committees that they have allowed too much of the responsibility for oversight to fall into the hands of assistants. Too much authority has been delegated to too many unelected staffers who have their own axes to grind. By limiting the number of other assignments they can hold, the members of the intelligence committees can find the time to exercise personal responsibility, and, on sensitive issues, a case can be made for excluding the staff entirely.

For his part, the CIA director has to be willing to meet this reform movement halfway. Mr. Casey has to be ready to spend more time on the Hill and to be more forthcoming in his briefings when there is evidence of a serious commitment to improve security.

In the American democracy, some form of congressional oversight of the secret power of intelligence is inevitable and necessary.

The problem is to prevent Congress from destroying what it seeks to oversee.

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